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PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT IN THE WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA REGION

The present document reports on and analyses major new trends and developments of UNICEF programme cooperation in the West and Central Africa region during 1991.

The UNICEF regional office has the responsibility for UNICEF cooperation in the following countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo and Zaire.

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INTRODUCTION

1. During the past year, a growing number of countries in the West and Central African region embarked upon the road to democratization. This process was the result of both growing demands by the educated élite for power sharing and pressures from the population at large. National conferences, proclaiming full sovereignty, were held in the Congo, Gabon, the Niger and Togo. Prime ministers were appointed in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, the Congo, the Niger, Togo and Zaire. Free presidential elections were held in Benin and Cape Verde, with opposition candidates scoring major victories. For the first time, new constitutions are referring to children's rights in Benin, Cape Verde, Guinea and Sierra Leone. However, the situation remains uncertain in, inter alia, Burkina Faso, Mali, Togo and Zaire.

2. Part of the region's political and social instability can be traced to Africa's continuing poor economic performance. Commodity prices, the continent's major source of foreign exchange, continue to be depressed. In spite of debt reduction and rescheduling, debt servicing continues to impose a heavy burden. Most Governments are also in arrears on payments to national businesses and industries. In this adverse economic climate, social service infrastructures have deteriorated seriously.

3. The situation in Liberia appeared hopeful with the initiation of the Yamoussoukro peace summits, which set the stage for a comprehensive settlement between the warring factions. However, the situation on the ground did not improve. Following skirmishes on the border between Liberia and Sierra Leone, thousands of Sierra Leonians became displaced and a large number fled to neighbouring Guinea. The sizeable refugee populations in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Sierra Leone continue to weigh heavily on the social service infrastructure and on the local economy in the border areas. UNICEF emergency relief activities in Liberia focused on a wide range of sustenance and rehabilitation projects in the areas of water supply, health, nutrition and children in especially difficult circumstances. In the neighbouring host countries, UNICEF continues to provide essential emergency relief assistance.

4. UNICEF and the African Development Bank agreed on operational modalities of cooperation, particularly a cost-sharing arrangement for joint project identification and assessment. The agreement has set the stage for closer cooperation benefiting children and women in the region.

5. In accordance with article 34 of the Plan of Action of the World Summit for Children, most countries of the region have set up mechanisms to elaborate national programmes of action. In a related development, the Organization of African Unity summit held at Abuja, Nigeria, called for a donors' conference on the African child to mobilize support for the implementation of the Summit Plan of Action. The conference is planned for late 1992.

I. PROGRAMME ANALYSIS

6. In the area of primary health care (PHC), the strategic approach of the Bamako Initiative is beginning to be applied firmly in a number a countries, with national capacity-building being strengthened at both national and district levels. Benefiting from structures of the expanded programme on immunization (EPI) built up over a period of several years, PHC systems are being developed more quickly, also facilitating gradual integration of EPI.

7. Results from coverage surveys in 19 countries show that universal child immunization has been achieved in seven countries of the region. Region-wide, coverage by antigen of children under one year of age exceeded 50 per cent. Tetanus toxoid coverage has also increased to the same level. The emergence of five doses of the same vaccine for women in coverage surveys in a number of countries is also an encouraging development. Greater attention is now being devoted to efficiency issues so as to ensure sustainability; a number of subregional workshops are being held to focus on these issues. To monitor EPI-related goals for the 1990s, surveillance is becoming a major priority.

8. While working towards the sustainability of EPI gains, health programmes are also paying greater attention to the region's main killer diseases, diarrhoeal diseases, acute respiratory infections (ARI) and malaria. The control of diarrhoeal diseases (CDD), which to date has been limited mostly to the distribution of oral rehydration salts, is now being expanded to take a more holistic approach, focusing on correct case management, breast-feeding and water supply and sanitation. Outbreaks of cholera in Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Ghana and Nigeria further exposed the need for improved CDD and increased international coordination. ARI interventions are still modest, consisting mostly of the provision of essential drugs. In the Gambia, home-based case management - still a major problem - is being analysed to provide guidance to other countries in the region. In the fight against malaria, interesting experiments with impregnated bed-net programmes are being carried out in the Gambia, the Niger and Sierra Leone.

9. With the spread of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) threatening the substantial gains made in mortality reduction, new impetus has been given to fighting the disease in the region. In several countries, including Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, the Congo, Sierra Leone and Zaire, UNICEF supports the production of information materials and communication activities. In Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Mali, activities will be reoriented so as to target the most vulnerable groups, using a risk-reduction approach. Several countries are planning increased support to AIDS orphans.

10. In the interest of national capacity-building, UNICEF has increased its support to regional training and information exchanges. Participation in joint World Health Organization (WHO)/UNICEF technical group meetings has become a matter of routine. UNICEF participated in the regional preparatory meeting for the Global Ministerial Conference on Malaria which will take place in the Netherlands in 1992.

11. Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon and Nigeria were selected to launch the "baby-friendly" hospital initiative in the region. In Nigeria, the Ministry of Health has enthusiastically accepted the initiative as a key element of nutrition support and maternal and child health care. In Côte d'Ivoire, four hospitals were selected in the main urban areas. In Gabon, a highly urbanized country with a major hospital structure, the initiative is expected to have a strong impact.

12. In collaboration with WHO and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), UNICEF is developing a community-based nutrition surveillance system, which should generate basic food and nutrition data. Because of climatic conditions and mounting demographic pressures, UNICEF increased its support to food security programmes. In countries such as Chad, Mali, Mauritania and the Niger, community surveillance systems are being encouraged.

13. Most countries in the region are now linking water supply and sanitation with other sectors. Programmes for the eradication of dracunculiasis (guinea worm disease) are on course, with progress reported in Benin, Cameroon, Ghana and Nigeria. In the area of sanitation, UNICEF support is focusing on hygiene education and latrine construction in rural areas. However, because programme results are not meeting set targets, a review of the current strategy is needed in terms of target groups, localities and community participation.

14. Since the World Conference on Education of All, and after a number of round tables in Cape Verde, Cameroon, Chad, Guinea, Mali and Togo, the development of education programmes was stepped up throughout the region. UNICEF support was directed primarily towards early childhood, non-formal and formal primary education. As the education sector becomes a major component of UNICEF-assisted programmes, there will be a need to hire more qualified professional staff to guide the process in Africa.

15. There is an increasing awareness in Africa of the plight of children in especially difficult circumstances. A number of major studies in Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal and Zaire are expected to lead to broad-based interventions on behalf of such children. In Liberia, UNICEF is helping children traumatized by the civil conflict through counselling and vocational training, and is uniting them with their families and communities. UNICEF will continue to advocate that Governments address the underlying causes of the problem.

16. In 1991, a series of regional meetings were held to analyse the impact of current programmes on women. The situation of African women could improve if their true productive role were taken into account. Several country offices have begun to collect gender-disaggregated data on girl children, whose situation requires particular attention because of their high vulnerability and poor chances for education.

II. EXTERNAL RELATIONS

17. External relations activities were geared to a large extent towards follow-up to the World Summit for Children. The first celebration of the Day of the African Child, in June 1991, reminded leaders of the promises made to children. Alliance-building continued: UNICEF took an active part in both the Francophone and the Organization of the Islamic Conference summits, each of which adopted resolutions in support of child survival, protection and development; a good number of African non-governmental organizations (NGOs), participating in the NGO Forum held in Zimbabwe, reconfirmed their commitment to the Summit Plan of Action.

18. In collaboration with the Johns Hopkins University (United States), communications training was provided to government counterparts and UNICEF staff from the Central African Republic, the Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali and Zaire. Communication strategies in support of breast-feeding promotion (Gabon) and the Bamako Initiative (Guinea) were developed as models for use in other countries in the region.

19. Ghana, Nigeria and Togo produced national language versions of Facts for Life, increasing the outreach of simple health messages. In cooperation with selected rural radio producers, FAO and other donors, UNICEF contributed to the development of a communication strategy for rural radio communicators.

20. The regional office provided support to Equatorial Guinea, the Gambia, Senegal and Sierra Leone for the production of information kits designed for fund-raising purposes. In the context of the Liberian emergency, a press kit was produced as part of the overall UNICEF media strategy developed for the country. In addition, two television spots were produced focusing on girls' education and street children.

21. Advocacy for children with film-makers was concentrated around the biennial Festival Pan Africain du Cinéma de Ouagadougou (Ouagadougou Pan African Film Festival) in Burkina Faso, which devoted one day to discussions on how the African film medium could contribute to raising awareness on the situation of children. Benin, the Central African Republic, the Congo and Gabon strengthened their cooperation with selected artists and intellectuals. The popular singer, Youssou N'dour, from Senegal, was named UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador for the performing arts to help strengthen advocacy with youth groups in the region.

22. With a few exceptions, most countries of the region registered increases in greeting card sales, with the Niger leading with a rise of 58 per cent.

III. OPERATIONAL AND MANAGEMENT ISSUES

23. As a result of increased political instability and civil unrest in the region, security has become a major concern of field offices. UNICEF staff in Zaire were temporarily evacuated in November. A regional administration/personnel workshop had to be postponed following political unrest in the host country, Togo.

24. Working conditions of local staff improved over the last year. Salary surveys were held in several countries and salary increases ranging from 5 to 115 per cent were approved to compensate for loss of purchasing power caused by inflation.

25. The Liberia and Togo offices became full country offices with the arrival of their respective representatives in July.

26. Regional training activities were organized in the areas of programming, monitoring and evaluation and nutrition. Trained staff are starting to assume the role of trainers in their respective country offices and at the subregional level.

27. Discussions are continuing with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on establishing common office premises in Benin, Togo and Zaire.

28. To improve the management of UNICEF resources in support of country goals, the development of management information systems began with the filling of the electronic data processing officer post in the regional office and the recruitment of subregional focal points. This team will assist country offices in computer systems development, computer training and hardware maintenance and upgrading.